

A Return to In Person Learning Is Not Best for Students or Teachers

My name is Peter Kuhns and I am a middle school social studies teacher in Corvallis. The following is why I believe that a return to in person instruction is a dangerous and unacceptable mistake. I would like to break my concerns about reopening school for in person learning into three pieces.

1. From a health perspective returning to in person schooling is an extreme, and in my view, unnecessary risk. Until there is a widely distributed vaccine (available to all people not just school staff) returning to in person learning is too dangerous. The current trend of cases both in Oregon and the United States does not support a return to any close contact activities. It is clear that the community as a whole isn't taking this pandemic as seriously as is needed and thus cases continue to run wild. The risk to the staff and students with a return to in person is in my mind unacceptable. While the research seems to be split on the danger the virus presents to the students, there have been cases of very young people who have gotten extremely sick and, in some cases, died. Exposing our students to that is dangerous and irresponsible. The danger to the staff is far more extreme. There have been many cases of educators who have contracted COVID and then died. On a personal level I am not ok with allowing myself or any of my colleagues to be sacrificial lambs. On a professional level, the damage that a potential loss of a staff member would do to both the students and staff mentally and emotionally is again, unacceptable. Finally, reopening schools doesn't just endanger the students and staff, but also their families and everyone who comes into contact with those families. Many of these seniors who are being ignored by the state are the primary caregivers for school age children. I can't even fathom the emotional damage a child would endure if they brought COVID home from school and their grandparent died. Returning to in person instruction would help to create an unacceptable increase in risk to our community as a whole.

2. Returning to in person schooling is not what is best for students. Throughout this pandemic I have repeatedly heard that we must do what is best for the students as a rallying call for a return to 'normal' educational practices. This is a fantasy that does not hold up under scrutiny for several reasons. First, under our current model students at the middle school where I teach see their teachers five days a week. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday we have students for 65-minute class periods. On Wednesday we have an additional short 25-minute period. If we move to an in-person model that exposure to our students would drop to two days, either Monday and Tuesday or Thursday and Friday for 65-minute classes. We would lose more than half of our available instruction time! That would not be best for students. Any gains or even mitigations of loss that we have managed so far this year would be rapidly erased. The most common argument I have heard is that teachers will just have to teach both online and in person to make sure that students can get enough learning. That is an unreal and unattainable pipe dream. In our current digital format, the majority of teachers are already putting in more than 40 hours a week. To expect us to then teach all day on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday AND continue our work digitally is cruel, infeasible, and unsustainable. That is not best for students.

Another common argument for in person learning is that students need the emotional support of being in person. If we were returning to a normal school environment I would agree, but we are not. Students and staff will be masked at all times. We must constantly maintain our distance

from one another. Imagine the emotional pain a younger student may face when they see a favorite teacher and try to hug them only to be denied by that teacher for health reasons. That is not best for students. The school that we will be returning to will not be the same school students and parents are used to. Students will be confined to desks which are spread apart from each other all day. The social aspect of school will largely be missing from in person instruction until there is a widespread vaccine. Distance learning isn't perfect, but at least students have easy and safe access to each other every day.

3. The last argument that I would like to address is the idea that distance learning hasn't been successful or hasn't been working. I will admit that distance learning has not been perfect, but neither is in person schooling. There have been some students who have struggled with distance learning, but again, there are students who struggle with 'normal' school as well. I know that our most vulnerable populations, particularly our SPED and Life Skills students have been the most affected by distance learning. Limited in person might be a needed alternative for them. By keeping those groups small we can hopefully mitigate much of the risk while still reaping a lot of the reward. However, for the vast majority of student's distance learning has not been significantly different in terms of their ability to learn. Across my three 6th grade social studies classes, my students averaged an 87% for the first quarter. That is a higher average than I had for my in-person classes last year. Talking to some of my colleagues I know that I am not the only teacher who feels that distance learning has been successful. There have been several studies published recently which have argued that the losses in LA and Math have been minimal during distance learning. When you combine that with the tremendous increase in safety for students, teachers, parents, families, and the community it seems clear the distance learning while not perfect has been a success so far this year.

As a state we struggled with distance learning in the spring because we did not have time to adequately prepare or set up. We were thrust into an unprecedented situation and had to scramble to keep up. This year has been different. We had forewarning that we would begin the year in a digital format, and we poured our efforts into creating a better product. We succeeded. I will be the first to admit that the first few weeks were a bit rough. Everyone was adapting to the new environment and we had to struggle with technological issues. However, as time went on things began to smooth out. Now we are finishing our first semester and things have started to settle to a new normal. One of the main reasons we started the year in a distance learning format was so that we did not have to bounce back and forth between in person and distance learning. Students need routine and a constant transition between different formats would be disruptive and harmful to their ability to learn. We have finally reached a point where distance learning has become the student's regular routine and altering that now seems unwise and unnecessary disruptive to student learning.

To quickly sum up, I do not believe that a return to in person learning is safe, productive, or in the best interests of our students, the staff, and our community until we have a widely available (for everyone) vaccine. I believe that maintaining and continuing to improve our distance learning provides the best and safest opportunity for our students to learn this school year.